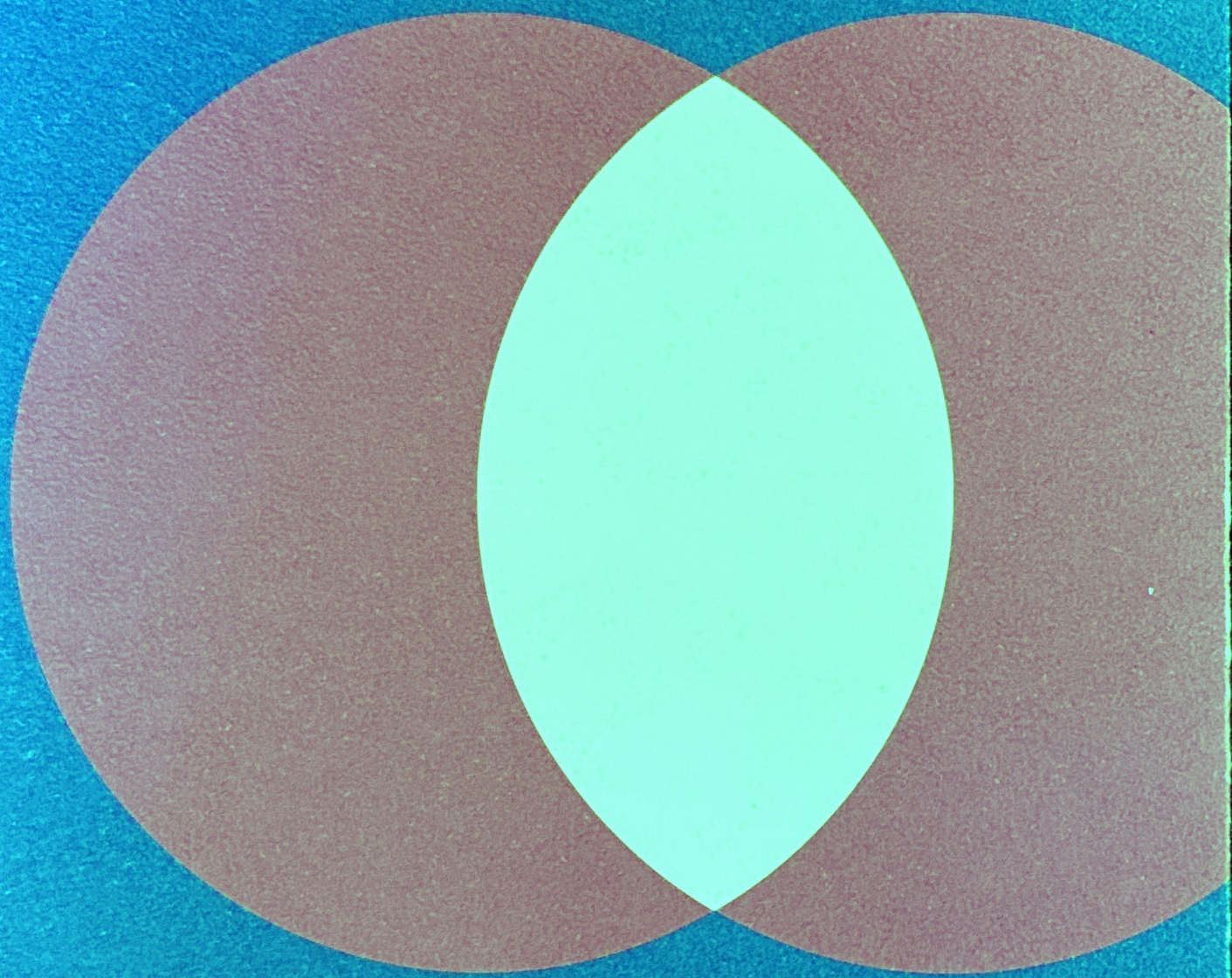


Fusion!



*From Alice Coltrane
to Moor Mother*

Alex Coles

Alice Coltrane and Carlos Santana,
“Angel of Sunlight” (1974)

Paths

Alice Coltrane and Carlos Santana mix jazz and rock by fusing their respective paths to the “Universal Tone,” the latter’s term for music’s spiritual dimension.¹ The fourteen-minute track “Angel of Sunlight,” from their collaborative LP *Illuminations* (1974), is a showcase for the counterpoint between their distinctive sounds on the Wurlitzer and electric

guitar. Where fusion acts as a potential conduit for Coltrane to reach a rock audience, it enables Santana to realize a meditative state without recourse to the hallucinatory drugs he'd previously relied on and now wanted to leave behind.²

Coltrane and Santana's collaboration was instigated prior to arriving in the studio. "We met for the first time in the spring of '73, when Alice invited me to come stay with her in Los Angeles."³ Their routine during the visit informs their LP the following year: each evening, Santana listened to Coltrane speak about music and spirituality, and at three thirty in the morning she would play the harp while he meditated. As they tuned into each other's ways of working, the conditions for fusion ripened.

With the tamboura droning and the congas beating, "Angel of Sunlight" opens with one of Santana's customary sustained notes. After a brief pause, the guitar returns with an increased intensity. Following solos from Jules Broussard on soprano saxophone and Tom Coster on Hammond organ, at seven-and-a-half minutes in, Coltrane takes her first solo, eagerly pressing the keys of the Wurlitzer. Where Santana's tone soars upward, Coltrane's burrows down. Moving in opposite directions, they produce a counterpoint of sonic tones. Capturing this, the trippy LP cover features a painting by Michael Wood depicting beams of light emanating from two angels.

The spiritual teachings of the Indian gurus Swami Satchidananda Saraswati and Sri Chinmoy lead Coltrane and Santana to adopt the names Turiya and Devadip, respectively. Addressing thousands of rock fans onstage at Woodstock in 1969 (where Santana played while tripping on LSD), Satchidananda speaks of the Universal Tone, describing the celestial sound

of contemporary music as the one “that controls the whole universe.”⁴ Coltrane introduces Santana to Satchidananda in 1973, but the guitarist is drawn more to Chinmoy, who he meets through John McLaughlin. Chinmoy encourages Santana to establish a more intimate relationship with the electric guitar, leading Santana to the realization that “a note has an aura, which comes from harmonics and overtones, and that’s where your guitar personality comes from.”⁵ Meditation is key to bringing these notes together to establish the player’s guitar persona. “If I feel myself scattered, pulling away from my core, if I feel the Universal Tone separating into different notes,” then “[I chant] ‘I am that I am. I am the light’” and focus is reestablished.⁶

Parallel with these spiritual teachings is John Coltrane and his tenor saxophone. After meeting in 1963 and marrying in 1965, from early 1966 until his death in 1967 Alice Coltrane is a vital part of John Coltrane’s band. Playing together felt “as if you were to just walk out of this door and see a new world, a new universe with so many opportunities in it,” she remarked.⁷ Recorded while grieving, Coltrane’s first solo LPs for Impulse! remains close to the feel of her late husband’s quartet circa the mid-1960s. But by 1971, with the release of *Journey in Satchidananda* and *Universal Consciousness*, her harp, piano, and Wurlitzer playing develop in an entirely new direction.⁸ On her subsequent LPs with Impulse!—1972’s *World Galaxy* and 1973’s *Lord of Lords*—Coltrane pursues an even more independent direction by using an ensemble of strings, her radical development culminating with *Illuminations* in 1974.

“The first thing I heard was [John] Coltrane’s volume and intensity,” remembers Santana, “[which]

fit the times,” the 1960s being characterized by the “very loud, violent darkness that came from the war and riots and assassinations.”⁹ Beginning with his debut LP in 1969, Santana introduced elements of Coltrane’s sound into his guitar playing, continuing with 1970’s *Abraxas* and 1971’s *Santana III*.¹⁰ With its intensity “it sounded like [Coltrane’s] horn was putting holes in the darkness—each time he blew, more light came through.”¹¹ The turn toward Eastern spiritual leaders is the direct result of a desire to draw light through the era’s darkness. The precise guitar tone Santana achieves recalls tracks such as “India” (1961) where John Coltrane embraced the sitar playing of Indian classical musician Ravi Shankar.¹² By way of Coltrane’s saxophone, Santana indirectly feeds Shankar into his guitar playing. Transposing the sound of the sitar into the electric guitar between 1967 and 1971, by 1972 Santana fully embraces jazz instrumentation, leading to that year’s *Caravanserai*. Santana then doubles down on the jazz influence, returning to John Coltrane with 1973’s tribute LP *Love Devotion Surrender*, recorded with McLaughlin. Inspired by Alice Coltrane’s trajectory, it takes meeting her in 1973 and their collaboration in 1974 for Santana to move beyond the spectre of the saxophonist.

Prior to her collaboration with Santana, Coltrane ventures into rock by appearing on Laura Nyro’s *Christmas and the Beads of Sweat* (1970) and the Rascals’ *Peaceful World* (1970), then joining both onstage in 1971 at New York’s Carnegie Hall to celebrate Satchidananda’s birthday (this performance being released by Impulse! only in 2024). Three years later her interest in rock increases, leading to the collaboration with Santana. “We did those sessions

at Capitol Studios in Los Angeles” and “everything was done live.”¹³ Coltrane notes that Santana “was so happy, so buoyant, such a beautiful soul,” injecting a “youthful dynamic into everything that we did.”¹⁴ While their exchange is two-way, the breadth of Coltrane’s musical and spiritual experience leads to her guiding the youthful Santana (twenty-seven at the time, a decade younger than Coltrane). “Hanging around with Turiya inspired me to write some spiritual melodies, and when she heard them she surprised me by coming up with some arrangements to go along with them — symphonic oceans of sound. [...] Those first tunes became ‘Angel of Air / Angel of Water’ on the *Illuminations* album.”¹⁵ With Coltrane on harp and Santana playing guitar solos, the track is in complete contrast to “Angel of Sunlight.”

“The engineer got an amazing tone on my guitar,” recalls Santana of his first solo on “Angel of Sunlight,” “partly because of the room but also because the [...] amplifier I brought with me had a second volume knob, which let me play softly but with a lot of intensity.”¹⁶ Despite finding this sonic tone, “my favorite moment on the whole album came right after I finished that solo. Suddenly Turiya blasted off like a spaceship, playing that Wurlitzer, bending the notes with her knees — she had some gizmo that stuck out of the side of the organ — and Jack [DeJohnette] and Dave [Holland] and I all looked at each other like we were hanging on for dear life! It was one of the most intense things I ever heard her play.”¹⁷ After the first few bars of the solo, DeJohnette increases the volume of his drumming and then Coster and Broussard solo on their Hammond organ and saxophone, respectively, continuing until the track reaches a mesmerizing climax.

Coltrane's fluid shift from piano to organ in the late 1960s was mirrored a few years later by her focus moving from organ to Wurlitzer. "In one meditation it was told to me that the organ had reached an age where it wouldn't serve properly [...] and the precise instrument I should get was revealed to me [...] and I could even read the insignia right there on the wood. So I went out to find the Wurlitzer."¹⁸

Universal Consciousness (1971) may be the first LP by Coltrane to feature the Wurlitzer, but it comes into its own on "Angel of Sunlight," as if waiting for its sonic counterpoint with Santana's guitar. The Wurlitzer and amplifier are vital to the fusion of paths to reach the Universal Tone.

Despite the energy and passion behind *Illuminations*, sales were relatively poor and critical reception largely disparaging.¹⁹ Perhaps in response to this, Santana immediately shifted toward a more scripted rock, typified by *Borboletta*, recorded just a few months later in 1974. Meanwhile, despite moving from Impulse! to the even more commercial Warner Brothers Records, Coltrane began to progressively retreat from the music business, becoming a Hindi swami in 1976 and eventually opening an ashram and retiring almost completely from the music business. Regardless of critical and commercial success, Coltrane and Santana instinctively sensed fusion was the only path through which music could develop. "That's how things change in music—one kind of music comes up next to another, and suddenly, shift!"²⁰ Their respective paths to the Universal Tone allow Coltrane and Santana's "Angel of Delight" to embody a significant, if overlooked, shift in the development of rock and jazz in the mid-1970s.